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Team hunts for Nazis in U.S. brought here to spy on Soviets

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PROVIDENCE — Three years ago, John J. Loftus, then a young lawyer with the Justice Department, saw a sign on a bulletin board of an opening in a special force that was being set up to investigate the presence of Nazi war criminals in America.

He took the job, and was given the names of a half-dozen suspected Nazi collaborators. Rather than try to "reinvent the wheel," he decided to go back into the intelligence files of the nation's various agencies to see what kind of information existed.

Probing through the vaults, piecing together bits of information scattered throughout the files of the State Department, the CIA, the Army and other agencies, he said he uncovered what appeared to be a conspiracy, originated in the State Department, to recruit what the department knew to be Russian-born Nazi collaborators and to bring them into the United States illegally.

Loftus composed this scenario:

These collaborators were not merely Nazi sympathizers. They had been hired by the Germans at the onset of the war in 1939 to establish a Nazi puppet government in Byelorussia, in the western part of the Soviet Union, as the German army rolled in. Their job, primarily, was to identify those key elements of the Jewish intelligentsia and other Jewish leaders, so they could be rapidly exterminated.

On one particular night, some 6,000 Russian Jews were rounded up by the Nazi-recruited police force, hauled off to the outskirts of town and shot. Many of the Jews, and particularly some of the babies, were buried alive.

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BUT THESE same collaborators were not prosecuted for their crimes after the war, Loftus said. Piecing the story together from the intelligence files, he found that the U.S. State Department engineered a plot to recruit these former collaborators, in the belief that they could serve as valuable informants about what was going on in the Soviet Union.

One of the "informants" was eventually appointed head of a displaced-persons' camp in Germany at the end of the war. Later, he was given transport to the United States under the cover of a broadcaster for Radio Liberty, through an elaborate "laundering" of the records designed to hide his real identity from U.S. Immigration office and even Army intelligence and the CIA.

Loftus, who recounted his findings at an Academy for Jewish Studies forum last night in Congregation Beth Shalom, said some 300 such collaborators were eventually brought into the United States, despite specific laws against such entries. The CIA, he said, knew of their involvement and turned their names over to the FBI — which, instead of building up a case against them, as the CIA hoped, recruited them to work as its own informants.

But there was another more tragic element to this intrigue, Loftus said. Many of the collaborators were really double agents, working for Russia. As a result of their espionage, scores of parachutists, dropped by the U.S. into the Soviet Union to set up a spy network, were captured and killed "within minutes" of their arrival.

Loftus, 32, and a Roman Catholic, said most of this record had been carefully concealed from Congress and from the public until last year, when — with the cooperation of the intelligence community — he was given the go-ahead to write a book on it and tell his story on CBS' Sixty Minutes.

Today, he said, these same collaborators are living and working in the United States, and the special investigations unit will be going after these men, although the first one died — somewhat mysteriously — just before he was to go to trial. Coincidentally, he was told of the man's death, not by anyone in the United States, but in a cable from the Soviet government.

LOFTUS SAID one of the tragedies of the affair was that an effort by some U.S. State Department officials to bring in anti-communist informants, resulted in the bringing in of Soviet agents.

But the real tragedy, he said, is that people who had been involved in the murder of hundreds, even thousands of innocent people, are walking the streets of America.

"What's going to happen now? We have 20 attorneys working on these cases. And I predict that as many as 20 cases will come to court. The bad news is that each case is going to take time."

"But why bother? you ask. The answer is that we owe it to ourselves."

"We owe that to all our children. True, the deportation of one 60-year-old man is not going to atone for the holocaust, but we can show our children that we will do everything we can to rectify this blot on our national honor."